

FAULKNER'S "SANCTUARY" AND THE SOUTHERN MYTH

By ALLEN TATE

UNTIL I was asked to write this Introduction I had not read "Sanctuary" since shortly after it was first published in 1931. I happened to read it, quite accidentally, in Paris in the early fall of 1932 in the English edition (Chatto & Windus), which John Peale Bishop gave me one day on the terrace of a café in the Rue Royale. Hemingway had given it to Bishop, dismissing it as blown-up and no good. I suppose he thought that Bishop, being a Southerner, might understand it better and see good in it. After thirty-six years I can't remember whether Bishop urged me to read "Sanctuary"; simply that he gave it to me. I remember that we talked about another book by Faulkner which had been published a couple of years before "Sanctuary," and which we had both read. This was "The Sound and the Fury." We agreed, rather solemnly, as young men habitually do, that it was a work of genius, but imperfect, and derivative of Joyce and Flaubert. I did not then understand the vanity that makes young men enjoy detecting literary influences; so I thought that Joyce in the Benjy section and Flaubert in the Jason section were not assimilated. Here was mere imitation. Around 1927 I had put Hemingway in his place by writing in a review that his style was a mixture of Captain Marryat and Defoe: it *was* that, of course, but it was also a great deal more than an imitation of either Defoe or Marryat. A few days after John Bishop gave me that copy of "Sanctuary" I read it through at a sitting.

In the three years between 1929 and 1932 William Faulkner had published three novels which in my opinion are his masterpieces: "The Sound and the Fury," "As I Lay Dying," and "Light in August." Other critics might argue for

"Absalom, Absalom!," "The Wild Palms," or "The Hamlet"; but nobody would omit from a list of Faulkner's best novels "The Sound and the Fury." And no critic has included, in a list of the best, "Sanctuary"; but I do include it, although one would have to place it near the bottom. It is well above "A Fable," which seems to me a mediocre calamity. No matter: there is no common law of literature which compels a writer to get better and better, year after year. And it is not important that "A Fable," "The Town," and "The Reivers" show little of Faulkner's genius.

With Faulkner in mind, I should like to suggest an historical moment for the climax of what has been called the Southern Renaissance. I would put it near the middle nineteen-thirties, at the high point of William Faulkner's creative period. I cannot believe that American readers make the mistake of a brilliant French critic, Michel Mohrt, who about ten years ago wrote a book on the *American* novel from which an unalert reader might get the impression that the *Southern* novel consists entirely of William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Truman Capote. Certainly Faulkner and Warren are a large part of it; but they are not all of it. If literary history has no laws, it nevertheless shows us empirically that a writer of Faulkner's magnitude has seldom appeared alone, in complete social isolation—though, like Faulkner and Hawthorne, he may isolate himself personally in order to avoid literary cliques and to concentrate on his work.

Before I try to "place" "Sanctuary" it may be useful to say something about the situation of the South from 1865 to about 1918 or the early nineteen-twenties. It must be borne in mind that neither Faulkner nor any other Southern writer had a fully developed, self-conscious historical sense. A novelist's historical sense is usually merely implicit in his immediate response to his material—in Faulkner's case, Yoknapatawpha County. The Southern situation, as we may see it in retrospect, will throw some light upon Faulkner and his great part in the so-called Southern Renaissance. Or should

we call it the Southern Naissance? For the antebellum South produced only Poe, Simms, Timrod, and Cable, and the period between the Civil War and the first World War only the apprentice works of James Branch Cabell and Ellen Glasgow; in neither period were there enough writers of the first order to constitute a literature. The political secession of the South occurred in 1861, the moral secession after 1865, and this lasted until the end of the first World War. Isolation by the kind of choice that results from defeat and poverty made the Southern States virtually a separate nation, or at least a colonial province ruled until 1877 by the conquerors, and exploited by their heirs until yesterday: the South was Uncle Sam's Other Province. This social situation produced a sentimental literature of Narcissism, in which the South tried to define itself by looking into a glass behind its back: not inward. It was thus not a literature of introspection, but a literature of romantic illusion; and its mode was what I have called elsewhere the Rhetorical Mode. I like Yeats' epigram about rhetoric—it is the way we quarrel with others, not ourselves—and rhetoric in the Reconstruction South was a good way of quarreling with the Yankees, who were to blame for everything. The quarrel raged with some cunning and versatility, for it elicited a good deal of fiction in which the Southern gentleman was the Chevalier Bayard *redivivus*, the Poor White a picturesque buffoon who spoke a quaint dialect, and the Negro Rousseau's Natural Man spoiled by having been deprived of the benefits of slavery.

Two exceptions must be noticed, for they made all the difference, or were eventually to do so. The first appeared in the antebellum South: Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's "Georgia Scenes," a series of yarns and anecdotes of the life of the Crackers and Red Necks of the Low Country. These are comic characters, but they are observed with precision and they are presented as complete, serious human beings, not as stereotypes, or even types. But "Georgia Scenes," published in 1835, is not "folk literature"; it was written

over a number of years by an educated man, a judge and a college president, for the delectation (a word that Longstreet might have used) of his peers. The second crucial work was published forty-five years later, just after the Reconstruction. This was Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," the first Southern novel in which the action is generated inside the characters. It is not, perhaps, the masterpiece that the academic Mark Twain "industry" has made it out to be; yet for the reason I have indicated, it is a work of great originality and historical importance. These two works are the beginning of modern Southern literature; they are also important for American literature as a whole. What concerns me here is the lessons they taught a great novelist of the twentieth century: the one a lesson in the necessity of direct observation of character and scene; the other the indispensable lesson that the art of fiction begins with inner conflict, not in a quarrel with a wicked enemy to the North, or anywhere else. William Faulkner was a master, the greatest of our time, of authentic observation and of the inner conflict.

Yet these lessons might not have been learned, even by Faulkner, but for two historical forces that seemed to converge dramatically at the end of the first World War. The Reconstruction of the South was completed, and even accepted by the South, on the condition that the race problem be left in Southern hands. For the South was becoming industrialized and thus an enthusiastic participant in the benefits of the Union; in short, getting rich again. Some recusants remained, chiefly young men disaffected by the war experience of 1917-18 and bemused by the violent transition from the Old South to the irresistible new. They had been in Europe, where the literary young men—Davidson, Ransom, Bishop, Faulkner, many others—had become aware of the great European writers of the half-century preceding them: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Proust, and now Joyce; and for the first time (so far as I know) Henry James was read by Southerners as an artist, not merely as a novelist of manners.

The re-entry of the South into the world and the violent social changes at home brought about a new consciousness which was able to learn the lessons of Longstreet and Mark Twain and to apply them to a vastly larger historical sense. This consciousness generated an image of the past in the present. And this image is the pervasive Southern subject of our time. Faulkner did not have to learn it. He was born with it and grew up with it, and he was perfectly conscious of it when he made Gavin Stevens say, in "Requiem for a Nun": "The past is not dead. It is not even the past."

I have had to simplify, perhaps I have made too schematic, a complex historical situation; and I have doubtless so exaggerated the value of Longstreet and Twain as to place them as "influences" that were consciously assimilated by a generation of Southern writers. I had better back off a little and call them forerunners. Yet both Twain and Longstreet give us the Southern frontier—Twain the frontier of the Old Southwest, Longstreet the frontier of the Southern Eastern Seaboard. The Southern frontier was not a locality, but an economy and a social structure; a culture, in fact, which has lasted into our time and which we can observe in the Snopeses and the Varners, frontier types corrupted by access to the money economy of the plantation system. What Faulkner learned from his forerunners—and Warren and Andrew Lytle a decade later—might be described as a technique of observation, a way of seeing the Southern rural types, both white and Negro, not as picturesque eccentrics in a setting of local color, but as characters in depth, complex and, like all other people, ultimately mysterious. But we shall not be able to estimate the larger literary influences that Faulkner felt until he has been dead at least twenty years. At present they seem to have been Twain, Longstreet, Dickens, Flaubert, and Joyce. What Faulkner evidently learned from Flaubert was a technique of cutting off a group of characters from himself and relating them to one another in an enclosed scene, such as we find in the opening chapters of "Sanctuary" leading up to the corncob rape of Temple

Drake at the Old Frenchman Place. The lesson of Joyce is more easily discerned: it is everywhere in Faulkner, not as imitation but as a method so adapted to his purposes as to be a vehicle of his own originality. One may cite only the Benjy section of "The Sound and the Fury," where the level of Benjy's perception is the inchoate "stream of consciousness" of an idiot; yet the exposition objectifies the blur of Benjy's mind by means of formal grammatical predication. This is a brilliant adaptation of Joyce.

Whether my guess as to the causes of the literary awakening of the South at the end of the first World War is true or not, there was, however one explains it, frenetic literary activity after 1918 that has scarcely abated yet. In the twenties and early thirties most of the Southern writers whose reputations we now take for granted appeared in the Southern "little magazines." I am not concerned here with the poets; so I shall merely allude to *The Fugitive*, in Nashville, where Ransom, Davidson, and Warren were first published. The *Double Dealer* in New Orleans published Faulkner's first work—poems and reviews. The index of *The Southern Review*, published in Baton Rouge from 1935 to 1942, would be a roll-call of the best Southern writers of this century: Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Stark Young, Elizabeth Madox Roberts.

These are the leading fiction writers of the older generation, with Faulkner at the head of the table; and they are sufficient evidence that he did not rise out of a cultural vacuum. Other critics have perceived what they consider the anomaly of Mississippi. How could the most "backward" state in the Union produce not only William Faulkner but Stark Young, Roark Bradford, and Eudora Welty—all very different from one another but all *very* Mississippi? Yeats gave the best answer to this question when he was asked how Ireland could have had a literary renaissance in the first decade of this century. He said, in effect, that poverty and ignorance had made it possible. There is no real

paradox in giving Yeats' answer to the same question about Mississippi after 1918. Poverty, and the ignorance that attends poverty, had isolated the common people—the Snopeses, the Varners, the Bundrens—with the result that their language retained an *illiterate* purity, uncorrupted by the “correct” English of half-educated schoolteachers, or by sociological jargon, or by the conditioned reflex language of advertising; while at the same time a small minority in Mississippi (and in other Southern states) maintained at a high level of sophistication a *literate* purity of diction based upon the old traditions of classical humanism. The majority could not read at all; a small minority could not only read but could read Latin and cap verses from Horace and Vergil. This was scarcely a democratic situation, but I daresay one must take one's literature where one finds it, under whatever social conditions will allow it to flourish.

The first-rate Southern poets of the twenties and thirties were few: Ransom, Warren, Davidson, and—as a poet she is unknown today—Elizabeth Madox Roberts. The preoccupation with the obsessive Southern subject, the past in the present, is obviously a social and historical interest, best approached through the form that Henry James elevated to the rank of true history. If the Southern Renaissance has not been a flash in the pan, it will continue in the Southern novel.

What, then, has been the imaginative focus of the Southern novel of our time? Malcolm Cowley once described it as “William Faulkner's Legend of the South,” supposing no doubt that Faulkner had invented it. And Faulkner, in a letter to Cowley while Cowley was getting together the “Portable Faulkner,” said that he was not conscious of a legend. That was as it should be—if the legend was to be imaginatively effective. For it was more than a legend, it was a myth; and it was every Southerner's myth from 1865 to about 1940, or up to the second World War. Had Faulkner invented the myth, it would not have been as good as it was for his purposes; nor would the myth of Oedipus, had

Sophocles invented it. For the Southern legend is a true myth which informed the sensibility and thought, at varying conscious levels, of the defeated South. (By myth I mean a dramatic projection of heroic action, or of the tragic failure of heroic action, upon the reality of the common life of a society, so that the myth *is* reality.)

The outlines of the Southern myth shift and vary with one's degree of self-consciousness. I see it somewhat as follows: the South, afflicted with the curse of slavery—a curse, like that of Original Sin, for which no single person is responsible—had to be destroyed, the good along with the evil. The old order had a great deal of good, one of the “goods” being a result of the evil; for slavery itself entailed a certain moral responsibility which the capitalist employer in free societies did not need to exercise if it was not his will to do so. This old order, in which the good could not be salvaged from the bad, was replaced by a new order which was in many ways worse than the old. The Negro, legally free, was not prepared for freedom; nobody was trying to prepare him. The carpetbaggers, “foreign” exploiters, and their collaborators, the native rascals called “scalawags,” gave the Old South its final agonies. The cynical materialism of the new order brought to the South the American standard of living, but it also brought about a society similar to that which Matthew Arnold saw in the North in the eighties and called vigorous and uninteresting.

The evil of slavery was twofold, for the “peculiar institution” not only used human beings for a purpose for which God had not intended them; it made it possible for the white man to misuse and exploit nature herself for his own power and glory. The exploitation of nature is a theme that runs through all Faulkner's work; it adds a philosophical, even a mystical, dimension to the conventional Southern myth. For most of us the myth is merely historical and secular. It is not, as I look back to the time when it could be taken for granted, a myth of the cosmic Greek order in which the gods took

part. But it did very well for the novel, as well perhaps as the New England myth of "The House of the Seven Gables," which the Southern myth somewhat resembles. Yet the differences are important. The classical theocratic culture of New England merely declined; its decline could not be focused upon a great action in which the entire society was involved. But the Southern culture did not decline (so the myth goes); it was destroyed by outsiders in a Trojan war. The "older" culture of Troy-South was wiped out by the "upstart" culture of Greece-North. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*; and the Yankees were therefore to blame for everything—until, as I have pointed out, the time of the first World War.

This myth, inadequate as it may appear to the non-Southern reader, has permitted a generation of Southern novelists to understand and to dramatize (that is, to depict in action) much of the Southern historical reality. In Faulkner, the outlines of the myth vary from novel to novel. Perhaps he developed it most fully in "Absalom, Absalom!" and "The Sound and the Fury." This is not the place to go through the novels and to try to see what the myth does with—or does to—the great cast of characters that Faulkner created. Just one example: may we not discern in Quentin Compson's flight to Harvard the flight of Aeneas from Troy, and may we not imagine the shadow of Quentin's weak father clinging, like Anchises, to his son's back? Here the myth breaks off; for Quentin had no Rome to found and, crushed by the weight of the past, he committed suicide.

The mythical outlines of "Sanctuary" are plain enough, but one must not expect the myth to be developed in an heroic action. The action is anti-heroic; or perhaps one might say more precisely that in spite of the violence of the rape of Temple and the lynching of Lee Goodwin, there is no action at all. Horace Benbow, a scion of the Old South, is morally impotent; he ought to be able to save Lee Goodwin from the false charge of the murder of old Tommy, who would have

been a legal witness to the rape of Temple Drake by Popeye. Temple's father, Judge Drake, in order to conceal her sojourn in a Memphis brothel, indirectly allies himself with Popeye, and allows Goodwin to be convicted. Judge Drake, in short, is the Old South corrupted, as Benbow is the Old South morally bankrupt. Temple herself is Southern womanhood: passive, destructive, and without the sense of right and wrong. I hesitate to describe her as a-moral; a-moral is a hybrid word. She is what psychiatrists call a psychopathic personality, dominated by compulsions and lacking in real emotions. Clarence Snopes appears as blackmailer and *agent provocateur*. The weak Gowan Stevens, Temple's "date," gets drunk and abandons her, and Southern womanhood cannot protect itself. All the upper-class characters, except Benbow, move from weakness to corruption. Temple's perjury in the courtroom seals Goodwin's fate, and Popeye goes free. Benbow remains pure but defeated. We last see Temple with her father in the Luxembourg Gardens. He has taken her to France to sit out the scandal. In the final chapter there is an awkward cutback to Popeye's boyhood, and we are told that he came to his end in Alabama by being hanged for the murder of a policeman.

Awkward as the conclusion may be, and anti-climactic as the mere expository account of Popeye and Temple is at the end, it is difficult to imagine a resolution to the violence at the center of the novel. There is nothing to be resolved. The action consists of a series of incidents, some of them, like the gangster's funeral and the country boys at Miss Reba's brothel, having little relation to the central situation: a series of incidents in which the action is non-action, for violence is not action but mere activity. Critics have called "Sanctuary" a *tour de force*, in the sense of "shocker." It *is* shocking; but the *tour de force* I believe has a more serious significance. To sustain one's interest in a novel of some three hundred pages in which there are characters but no action is a triumph of virtuosity.